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ABSTRACT

The single great value of composition theory is that it gives writing instructors ways to perceive and to talk (about)/write (about) and experience the language that they purport to teach. It is a vocabulary (or set of vocabularies) that, in its structures and definitions, (re-)structures and (re-)defines perceptions of language. If writing is a social process, there must be serious advantages to treating it as such--and to doing this by using the social dynamics accessible in the classroom as part of the course of writing instruction. In an experimental, team-taught course on censorship students were allowed to select their own topics and their modes of discourse. Subject matter was presented not only by the designated professors and students but also by a number of guest lecturers. Students completed assignments that consisted of both written (collaboratively composed proposals about a controversial work of art for which the audience would be the students' local board of education) and oral (a 15-minute dramatization of the proposal) components. Both students and teachers were forced to explore attitudes they found uncongenial. If the cultural boundaries present within the class had not been present, much of the dynamic force of the collaborative efforts would have been absent, and students would not have risen to the challenge of collaborative and not always comfortable work. That they did so, and achieved a high level of researched coherence in their work, suggests that their modes of coping with the "friction" inherent in the arrangements were both appropriate and effective, and that these do not necessarily delimit the possibilities for intercultural communication, but actually enable intellectual exchange and growth. (SAM)

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Social Contexts: Crossing (Exploring, Assaulting, Metabolizing?) Cultural Boundaries in the Classroom

by

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I. A Beginning

For several years, **THEORY** has loomed large in the composition classroom. As Josephine Koster Tarvers has pointed out, referring to comp teachers in Teaching Writing: Theories and Practice, "all of us who are in this business have at least one thing in common: we love well-chosen words. Most of us love--and have been trained how to love--the words selected and arranged by 'great' writers, the professional authors of past and present" (3). The list, as she says, citing "Chaucer, Austen, Milton, Nabokov, Morrison, Naipul, Didion . . ."(3) can indeed go on often indefinitely.

For teachers of my generation, this love was come to in what now seems a surprisingly un-self-conscious way. As I was taught these--or other writers--in school, I formed highly decided tastes for some kinds of prose and not others, for some kinds of stories and not others, for some manifestations of poetry and not others. I was not, until many years later, troubled at all by the implications of those choices for the very simple reason that, until I entered graduate school at Rutgers University rather late in life, I had no need to examine those choices beyond the fairly easy level of choice; indeed, as long as I was teaching in the public high schools of New Jersey, I was far too busy to do so. And there, not surprisingly, is a sticking point for most working teachers. After our own undergraduate and graduate educations, we are denied sufficient time (by the requirements of our jobs, by our commitments to particular avenues of literary research, by our families. . .this also is an endless list) to examine those choices in what might be exceedingly productive ways.

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II. A. Complication

Also in Teaching Writing, Koster has proposed a second list ("Derrida, Eagleton, Kristeva, Culler, Fish, Kolodny, and Vygotsky. . ."{3}) which can also be extended almost interminably, of those of have encoded what Koster identifies as "words about well chosen words" (3), and who can equally well be referred to as theorists. These writers, we have been taught, in our specialized graduate departments, to revere. That these words are indeed privileged is indisputable--they recur again and again in anthologies and journals, and are with absolutely unremarkable frequency (as they are here) trotted out as the bases of conference papers. This recurrence is, I believe, exceedingly important, for it serves to underscore those boundaries the **DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH** (as it might be imagined in some Platonic ideal sense), has set for itself--**i.e.** the boundaries defined by speech/writing (to be read speech-slash-writing) or lit/comp (lit-slash-comp), which have been discussed at great length by yet other theorists about "well chosen words."

I once wrote a review of James Moffett's The Universe of Discourse in which I complained that he had created a stirring call to arms, a plea for the liberation of and into language, and then not given us (the teacher-slash-scholar-theorists) the means to respond. Although I value his book greatly, I must confess that I still feel the same way. I share David Olson's passionate belief in "the human conversation" that he locates in speech and text, which he sees as interactive agents, and in Ken Bruffee's closely related sense of the interrelationship of speech and writing. Yet much of the theory to which we in composition have access persists in supporting that division between composition and literature (as if the two could actually be separated) that so viciously plagues many departments. This may be a result of the fact that much composition theory is in fact literary theory given a mildly different slant from its original condition. Thus, for example, we have varieties of composition theory that echo literary/critical theory:

New Criticism, for example, formed the basis of the 1949 Modern Rhetoric by Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks. Modern Rhetoric applies the notions of New Criticism to writing as it is taught in the college classroom. In this theoretical model, the text itself finally existed independent of both reader and writer, a discrete and diamantine entity not entangled in

the web of socio/psycho/historical forces that surround its inception by the writer and its reception by the reader. Since Modern Rhetoric, we have been the survivors of such energetic and occasionally contradictory theorists as James Kinneavy, Stanley Fish, Roland Barthes, Mikhail Bakhtin--whose work in The Dialogic Imagination suggests that texts have a life of their own, engaging in a sort of textual meta-dialog (would this, one wonders,a be better described as a metalog?)--a notion that makes fairly good sense when we remember that even an English paper will sometimes (language as discovery) take on a life of its own, despite its author's wishes or conscious intent. Annie Berthoff, Pat Bizzell, Walter Ong . . .again, the list can be proliferated indefinitely, have gone on to apply various stripes of rhetorical analysis to what comes out of (and goes into) the composition classroom.

III. No Apologies to Warren & Brooks, I'll Take My Stand, Too

My own belief, based on twenty some years in the classroom, is that the single great value of theory is that it gives us ways to perceive and to talk(about)/write(about)/ and experience the language that we purport to teach. In other words, it is a vocabulary (or set of vocabularies) that, in its structures and definitions, (re-)structures and (re-)defines our perceptions of language. This, of course, is exhilarating stuff. The great danger of theory, on the other hand, and one that we cannot afford to dismiss, is that the theoretical discourse itself can easily subsume any sane and daily relationship to the its subject--the language at work and the student writer.

A friend of mine, five or six years ago, having heard Jacques Derrida speak at Yale, reported that for a full ninety minutes the great deconstructionist was, so far as she could tell, absolutely incoherent and incomprehensible. I do not pass along this hearsay on as fact, but as an instance of the "levels of discourse" problem at its extreme. If a Ph.D. in English cannot follow the abstruse discourse of the theorist, what meaningful connection can that discourse have with the college student (the particular, **real** college student) we each meet and work with every day? What, if indeed it exists at all, is the construction that allows one to interact with the other? What prevents the discourse of the writing instructor from being as incomprehensible to her student(s) as Derrida was to my friend?

The meaningful constructions, so far as I can tell, are social in nature and in practice. Language is a social phenomenon before it is anything else. This means, among other things, that it is, on a rather clear, obvious, basic level, referential. There are at least some meanings that we as readers (and writers) can nail down with reasonable accuracy. At the same time, as anyone who has played the "telephone game" (also, I think, remembered as "pass it on") can testify, meanings--as well as words themselves--shift in the perception of hearers (or, analogically, readers) who join in the dialog. While I won't repeat the entire argument for social constructions of language (Kenneth Bruffee still, to my mind, having done the best job of that), I will say that without social interaction, language is in great danger of becoming an instrument of isolation, the enemy rather than the means of communication: yet communication remains, after all, a goal for the composition student who needs, at the very least, to communicate to the course instructor that she (or he) "gets it"--and can grow and communicate in a written discourse belonging to the university--an entity identified by David Bartholomae as a serious (and often exclusionary) "other" in the student's perception.

IV. So What Am I Doing Here?

If, as I believe, writing is language is social process, then there must be serious advantages to treating writing as such--and to doing this by using the social dynamics accessible in the classroom as part of the course of writing instruction. This, rather self-evidently, includes not only "discussion," but also peer tutoring, peer revision and editing groups, and collaborative compositions--the last being at the heart of what this paper is concerned with. I have, for several years, made it a practice in my English 100 (Basic Writing) and English 101 (identified at various instutions as "Expository Writing," "Composition," "Fundamentals of Composition" and so on, or even as "regular" freshman comp) to include regular peer revision sessions, and at least one collaborative writing assignment. One indication of the value of the assignment lies in the student responses to it, which are generally positive, but which vary from group to group and individual to individual. Thus, one student reported on her evaluation, "I learned who I couldn't trust," and another that "It was too hard to get everyone . gether," and still another that she had "experienced a breakthrough; I was able to see things in a whole different way from

when the group started working together." In this last response lies the most hopeful and provocative outcome to the collaborative paper--seeing "in a whole different way"--or, if you will, with new eyes.

This year, I have used the collaborative writing and research assignment in a rather different way. The course is an experimental, team-taught course called "Issues in Censorship," which began because a group of teachers felt an urge to teach banned books. Yet, when the teaching collaboration began, it became clear that the banned books themselves would make pretty dull fodder for a full term. In consequence, the collaborating teachers found themselves relinquishing that very control that as teachers they valued.

As a result they (we) embarked on an unsettling, if invigorating course in which students were largely allowed to select their topics, their mode of discourse, and in which the subject matter was presented not only by the designated professors and the students, but by a number of guest lecturers including professors of other disciplines, a high school principal, a working journalist, a scientist, a museum curator, and so on to the end of the term. One of the outcomes of this collaboration is that I, as an instructor, had a much better idea of just how unsettling the collaborative process can be to students. After all, I was not only sharing my position with a colleague, but I was letting outsiders "run my class,"--or, to put it another way, to set the terms of the class discourse.

I found myself, to my very real horror, feeling threatened by each intrusion into "my course," --or, to extend the analogy, by everyone else's input into "my paper." I also found, which was absolutely exhilarating, a spirit of cooperation and openmindedness on the part of the class which, it seemed, resulted in large measure from the multiplicity and disparity of the voices in the front of the room.

The make-up of the class is worth noting. Of eighteen students, only three were male. Of the males all were white, traditional students. Of the fifteen women, two were black and the remainder white. Three of the white women were non-traditional students with children, one of them a lesbian who was pregnant (serving as a surrogate mother for a childless couple). In general, the unlimited free speech advocates outnumbered the more conservative students by at least two to one, although some of the unlimited free speechers came from starkly conservative backgrounds. Within the classroom, then, even excluding the cultural loci of myself

(northeastern liberal academic) and my colleague (southeastern liberal academic), and our ages, there were a number of cultural boundaries to be explored. The deeply fundamentalist religious conservatism of some students stood in stark contrast to the radical intellectual activism of others; the relationship of the African-American students to the problems of language (one course topic being "Taboo Language") was quite different from that of the white women, and that of the women from that of the men; the concerns of two of the three mothers about what children could reasonably be exposed to was at extreme variance with just about everyone else's views of the same subject, particularly those of the lesbian. There existed within the class the potential for a good deal of friction, and at least initially, there was also a great deal of caution on the parts of those students who "spoke up" in discussion.

In retrospect, it strikes me that I probably had a lot of gall in asking these students to work collaboratively; yet I did so, asking them to complete an assignment consisting of both the oral and written segments:

> 1. Written component: Select a work of art or literature that is controversial, and submit a formal proposal to your local board of education. This proposal must be convincingly researched and documented, and should fill at least five pages exclusive of documentation.
>
> 2. Oral component: Present to the class a fifteen minute dramatization of the issue(s) addressed by your proposal.

The performances can best be described as lively and intelligent; each reflected some extremely determined and intelligent research. Dramatizations ranged from a staged press conference, to an obscenity trial, to a talk show. In each group, all members were actively involved in presenting the material they had elected to work with, and in several instances group members were promoting a point of view at variance with their own.

The papers, also collaborative, were equally rewarding. At various points during the semester, my colleague and I adopted the role of "devil's advocate" for the sake of discussion. Thus, at different times, I found myself arguing passionately for the suppression of material I don't want to see suppressed, and delineating the presence of "Satanistic symbols and values" in the lyrics of songs and children's books. Like my students, I was being forced by the course itself to explore attitudes that were uncongenial to me, and like them, I developed a deeper

appreciation of the complexity of censorship issues.

One group, for instance (comprised of those students whose turn of mind can best be described as radical/activist, and one of whom was the child of an academic) made it their project to argue against inclusion of Norma Klein's Family Secrets in the curriculum of a public middle school. The student who in the dramatization took on the role of the Rev. Mrs. Tatterspoon, a fundmentalist Christian parent deeply angered over her daughter's introduction to Klein's novel, enacted (with considerable zest) a role that was a polar opposite to her real feelings about the book and about adolescent access to literature. So doing, she availed herself of points of view and evidence that she would otherwise not have examined in any depth, not only reading the novel in question, but analyses and critiques of that novel, weaving the strands of her argument together in a compelling (if not always absolutely convincing) indictment of the book.

> . . .I've heard all the liberal arguments, even from the author, herself, in various articles. She says realism is important; that children need someone to relate to them and help them work through all the changes taking place in their bodies and their minds. I say that's what we, as parents, are here for. . . .

and argument that culminates in an intriguing blend of Christian and anti-intellectual rhetoric with political threat:

> Crime and deprivation have increased in this country right along with literacy. It is trash like this that has put this world in such a chaotic state. . . . We are in need of a school board that will take a stand against that shadow of evil that has come upon South Habersham High School. If some action is not taken, you will realize your mistake at the next election for those seats of yours.

Yet this diatribe is not merely diatribe; it is well supported by intelligent ancillary reading, citing studies by Freedman ('84), Potts, Huston, and Wright ('86), and Ginsburg, Jenkins, and Walsh ('89) that would seem to support the non-censorial view, and attacking these studies on the basis of their sample selection. Interestingly, the viewpoint of the 'teacher' defending the book, a viewpoint coincident with that of the students, was less well researched--consisting of the reiterated statement that "literature can be a preparation for life--even in a little Southern town." The not yet articulated lesson that lies here is that conviction, in formal argument, is not enough. Being "on the side of the angels" will not get you much without evidence. Ultimately, what the

paper lacked in evidence for the presumed "right" view, it gained in increased understanding of the opposite view. Significantly, one of the members of the group reported that "the group was too homogeneous--we agreed too much."

By contrast another group, this one containing the three men in the class (one of whom is also the child of an academic), chose to argue a position that they did believe in--and which they felt all the "evidence" supported. Their evidence included a detailed reading of the book in question (Elbert's Bad Word), an explanation of the controversy (the use of the word "wizard" being interpreted by some as an endorsement of witchcraft), a series of letters to a local newspaper about the book's contents, research on the nature and practice of witchcraft, the application of the proposed standard to many other books, and an interview with a child psychologist who interpreted the wizard as (of course) a child psychologist. In structuring their own argument, the group was at pains to establish the credibility of the writer as a parent, a citizen, and an educated reader:

> As a parent of a child in our community, I was shocked to find that you have pulled a quality piece of literature from the shelves of our elementary school libraries. . . .I care deeply about the protection and moral guidance of our children but I do not believe that censorship. . .is very sensible protection. . . .Many of the books that I have been fondest of in my life have been those that have opened my mind to different ideas, beliefs, and cultures.

Unlike the first group, they not only advance their own argument through a presentation of interpretation of text and a relation of the book's history in a neighboring county, but they present and answer the arguments of the opposition, ending with a civic appeal that is not couched as threat.

> I would like to close by commending the Columbia County Board of Education for its decision to keep Elbert's Bad Word on the shelves of their libraries. I urge our own Board of Education to do the same. For the benefit of our children's education, the respect of our community as an open minded place to live, and the protection of our right to freedom in this country, please vote to keep this book in our libraries.

One is tempted, of course, to wonder what the Reverend Mrs. Tatterspoon would have done to this carefully reasoned secular argument--since hers was apparently the only viewpoint the group failed to negate. What had happened, as with the other group, was a failure to completely document the position already perceived as right--and thus to vitiate that position's force to some

degree.

Certainly, it is not surprising that each group had a "blind spot" where preconceptions made the group an ineffective lens for viewing possible arguments. The inherently liberal bent of the first group had inhibited them from collecting "backup" material on the liberal stance, and the inherently secular turn of mind of the second group had led them to disregard the religious arguments that might have been made against the book. As each group constituted itself an entity in the class, it revealed a good deal about the cultural orientation of its members.

Other groups coped with the cultural boundaries they confronted in different, but no less revealing ways. A group of women that was, self-confessedly, the most conservative and most likely to be pro-censorship of the class, defended the work of Judy Blume against censorship in a clever and "risk-guarded" way. Every question about the validity of Blume's work was answered with a quotation from Blume herself. Thus, the group projected a liberal, inclusive view of Blume's work without putting their own "voices" on the line. The convolutions of phrasing believable "right" questions for the answers suggests that there may have been a certain degree of discomfort for these students in espousing the position they finally did; but it also suggests a very real enthusiasm for the author under discussion, and a very real willingness to move outside of their predispositions.

The remaining group, which included two white and two black women, opted to work with rock and rap lyrics, rather than with literature per se, and limited the issue to one of "generational conflict," thereby preventing the question of race from arising at all. To me, this appears to be an excellent (but hardly risk-free, since it closed the possibility of dialog about race) way of defusing possible tension between two cultural backgrounds and at the same time opening up territory that both groups can address with a minimum of discomfort. At the same time, it serves to prevent address of some rather important issues relating to the topic under research. Their argument avers:

> The attack against Rock music has been wide-spread in recent years. One of the best selling books has been Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind. He asserts that today's MTV generation is a group of mindless zombies led solely by their genitalia which is only perpetrated by the music. He refers to this generation as overtly complacent--"tolerant and open, free of old prejudices. . . ." Were this only true. Couldn't the world use a little more of the tolerance Bloom so despises? There would be less racism, fewer wars, etc. Bloom has sold an entire generation short. He, not

> unlike [Tipper] Gore's group, believes them to be incapable of making informed, responsible decisions. He believes they live only for the music and the sexual activity which it entices. Gore believes they, therefore, need protection from such music.

If the cultural boundaries present within the class had not been present, much of the dynamic force of the collaborative efforts would have been absent, and the students would not have risen to the challenge of collaborative and not always completely comfortable work. That they did so, and achieved a high level of researched coherence in their work, suggests that their modes of coping with the "friction" inherent in the arrangement are (despite the restrictions that these particular coping modes impose--at least initially--on some areas of discussion) both appropriate and effective, and that they do not necessarily delimit the possibilities for intercultural communication; indeed, these strategies can make those possibilities both useful and necessary for their continued intellectual growth.

Among those students who responded in the voluntary evaluation of the assignment, certain points of unease became apparent:

1. Group time is difficult to schedule. (6)
2. Discomfort about "relinquishing control" (my phrase) or as two students put it, "I felt uneasy having to rely on others" and "Group projects make me nervous because my grade depends on someone else. (2)
3. It was difficult to get everyone to work together. (accommodate a variety of ideas) (5)
4. It was difficult to write in a style that would blend with someone else's. (2)

For these same students, the rewards of the project were identified as:

1. Learning a lot about the topic (greater breadth/depth of research). (5)
2. Not being the only one responsible. (2)
3. Getting to know people better. (2)
4. Finding new ways of perceiving controversial material. (1)

One student, who found herself involved in a group generally opposite her own point of view was delighted that "everyone was considerate, & <u>interested</u> in my point of view." Another (my favorite) reported that she hadn't understood the assignment, but that her group members

explained it to her. If the student perception of what they gained from the project is inconclusive, that does not mean that the gains were not real--or that they will not be revealed in subsequent work. That these gains, and the interactions that created them, are social in nature, is something we all might remember in dealing with the the multiple universes of discourse that confront us every day.

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